

Drift from Two Shores

by

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The Man On The Beach

I

He lived beside a river that emptied into a great ocean. The narrow strip of land that lay between him and the estuary was covered at high tide by a shining film of water, at low tide with the cast-up offerings of sea and shore. Logs yet green, and saplings washed away from inland banks, battered fragments of wrecks and orange crates of bamboo, broken into tiny rafts yet odorous with their lost freight, lay in long successive curves,-- the fringes and overlappings of the sea. At high noon the shadow of a seagull's wing, or a sudden flurry and gray squall of sand- pipers, themselves but shadows, was all that broke the monotonous glare of the level sands.

He had lived there alone for a twelvemonth. Although but a few miles from a thriving settlement, during that time his retirement had never been intruded upon, his seclusion remained unbroken. In any other community he might have been the subject of rumor or criticism, but the miners at Camp Rogue and the traders at Trinidad Head, themselves individual and eccentric, were profoundly indifferent to all other forms of eccentricity or heterodoxy that did not come in contact with their own. And certainly there was no form of eccentricity less aggressive than that of a hermit, had they chosen to give him that appellation. But they did not even do that, probably from lack of interest or perception. To the various traders who supplied his small wants he was known as "Kernel," "Judge," and "Boss." To the general public "The Man on the Beach" was considered a sufficiently distinguishing title. His name, his occupation, rank, or antecedents, nobody cared to inquire. Whether this arose from a fear of reciprocal inquiry and interest, or from the profound indifference before referred to, I cannot say.

He did not look like a hermit. A man yet young, erect, well- dressed, clean-shaven, with a low voice, and a smile half melancholy, half cynical, was scarcely the conventional idea of a solitary. His dwelling, a rude improvement on a fisherman's cabin, had all the severe exterior simplicity of frontier architecture, but within it was comfortable and wholesome. Three rooms--a kitchen, a living room, and a bedroom--were all it contained.

He had lived there long enough to see the dull monotony of one season lapse into the dull monotony of the other. The bleak northwest trade-winds had brought him mornings of staring sunlight and nights of fog and silence. The warmer southwest trades had brought him clouds, rain, and the transient glories of quick grasses and odorous beach blossoms. But summer or winter, wet or dry season, on one side rose always the sharply defined hills with their changeless background of evergreens; on the other side stretched always the illimitable ocean as sharply defined against the horizon, and as unchanging in its hue. The onset of spring and autumn tides, some changes among his feathered neighbors, the footprints of certain wild animals along the river's bank, and the hanging out of party-colored signals from the wooded hillside far inland, helped him to record the slow

months. On summer afternoons, when the sun sank behind a bank of fog that, moving solemnly shoreward, at last encompassed him and blotted out sea and sky, his isolation was complete. The damp gray sea that flowed above and around and about him always seemed to shut out an intangible world beyond, and to be the only real presence. The booming of breakers scarce a dozen rods from his dwelling was but a vague and unintelligible sound, or the echo of something past forever. Every morning when the sun tore away the misty curtain he awoke, dazed and bewildered, as upon a new world. The first sense of oppression over, he came to love at last this subtle spirit of oblivion; and at night, when its cloudy wings were folded over his cabin, he would sit alone with a sense of security he had never felt before. On such occasions he was apt to leave his door open, and listen as for footsteps; for what might not come to him out of this vague, nebulous world beyond? Perhaps even SHE,--for this strange solitary was not insane nor visionary. He was never in spirit alone. For night and day, sleeping or waking, pacing the beach or crouching over his driftwood fire, a woman's face was always before him,--the face for whose sake and for cause of whom he sat there alone. He saw it in the morning sunlight; it was her white hands that were lifted from the crested breakers; it was the rustling of her skirt when the sea wind swept through the beach grasses; it was the loving whisper of her low voice when the long waves sank and died among the sedge and rushes. She was as omnipresent as sea and sky and level sand. Hence when the fog wiped them away, she seemed to draw closer to him in the darkness. On one or two more gracious nights in midsummer, when the influence of the fervid noonday sun was still felt on the heated sands, the warm breath of the fog touched his cheek as if it had been hers, and the tears started to his eyes.

Before the fogs came--for he arrived there in winter--he had found surcease and rest in the steady glow of a lighthouse upon the little promontory a league below his habitation. Even on the darkest nights, and in the tumults of storm, it spoke to him of a patience that was enduring and a steadfastness that was immutable. Later on he found a certain dumb companionship in an uprooted tree, which, floating down the river, had stranded hopelessly upon his beach, but in the evening had again drifted away. Rowing across the estuary a day or two afterward, he recognized the tree again from a "blaze" of the settler's axe still upon its trunk. He was not surprised a week later to find the same tree in the sands before his dwelling, or that the next morning it should be again launched on its purposeless wanderings. And so, impelled by wind or tide, but always haunting his seclusion, he would meet it voyaging up the river at the flood, or see it tossing among the breakers on the bar, but always with the confidence of its returning sooner or later to an anchorage beside him. After the third month of his self-imposed exile, he was forced into a more human companionship, that was brief but regular. He was obliged to have menial assistance. While he might have eaten his bread "in sorrow" carelessly and mechanically, if it had been prepared for him, the occupation of cooking his own food brought the vulgarity and materialness of existence so near to his morbid sensitiveness that he could not eat the meal he had himself prepared. He did not yet wish to die, and when starvation or society seemed to be the only alternative, he chose the latter. An Indian woman, so hideous as to scarcely suggest humanity, at stated times performed for him these offices. When she did not come, which was not infrequent, he did not eat.

Such was the mental and physical condition of the Man on the Beach on the 1st of January, 1869.

It was a still, bright day, following a week of rain and wind. Low down the horizon still lingered a few white flecks--the flying squadrons of the storm--as vague as distant sails. Southward the harbor bar whitened occasionally but lazily; even the turbulent Pacific swell stretched its length wearily upon the shore. And toiling from the settlement over the low sand dunes, a carriage at last halted half a mile from the solitary's dwelling.

"I reckon ye'll hev to git out here," said the driver, pulling up to breathe his panting horses. "Ye can't git any nigher."

There was a groan of execration from the interior of the vehicle, a hysterical little shriek, and one or two shrill expressions of feminine disapprobation, but the driver moved not. At last a masculine head expostulated from the window: "Look here; you agreed to take us to the house. Why, it's a mile away at least!"

"Thar, or tharabouts, I reckon," said the driver, coolly crossing his legs on the box.

"It's no use talking; I can never walk through this sand and horrid glare," said a female voice quickly and imperatively. Then, apprehensively, "Well, of all the places!"

"Well, I never!"

"This DOES exceed everything."

"It's really TOO idiotic for anything."

It was noticeable that while the voices betrayed the difference of age and sex, they bore a singular resemblance to each other, and a certain querulousness of pitch that was dominant.

"I reckon I've gone about as fur as I allow to go with them hosses," continued the driver suggestively, "and as time's vallyble, ye'd better unload."

"The wretch does not mean to leave us here alone?" said a female voice in shrill indignation. "You'll wait for us, driver?" said a masculine voice, confidently.

"How long?" asked the driver.

There was a hurried consultation within. The words "Might send us packing!" "May take all night to get him to listen to reason," "Bother! whole thing over in ten minutes," came from the window. The driver meanwhile had settled himself back in his seat, and whistled in patient contempt of a fashionable fare that didn't know its own mind nor destination. Finally, the masculine head was thrust out, and, with a certain potential air of judicially ending a difficulty, said:--

"You're to follow us slowly, and put up your horses in the stable or barn until we want you."

An ironical laugh burst from the driver. "Oh, yes--in the stable or barn--in course. But, my eyes sorter failin' me, mebbee, now, some ev you younger folks will kindly pint out the stable or barn of the Kernel's. Woa!--will ye?--woa! Give me a chance to pick out that there barn or stable to put ye in!" This in arch confidence to the horses, who had not moved.

Here the previous speaker, rotund, dignified, and elderly, alighted indignantly, closely followed by the rest of the party, two ladies and a gentleman. One of the ladies was past the age, but not the fashion, of youth, and her Parisian dress clung over her wasted figure and well-bred bones artistically if not gracefully; the younger lady, evidently her daughter, was crisp and pretty, and carried off the aquiline nose and aristocratic emaciation of her mother with a certain piquancy and a dash that was charming. The gentleman was young, thin, with the family characteristics, but otherwise indistinctive.

With one accord they all faced directly toward the spot indicated by the driver's whip. Nothing but the bare, bleak, rectangular outlines of the cabin of the Man on the Beach met their eyes. All else was a desolate expanse, unrelieved by any structure higher than the tussocks of scant beach grass that clothed it. They were so utterly helpless that the driver's derisive laughter gave way at last to good humor and suggestion. "Look yer," he said finally, "I don't know ez it's your fault you don't know this kentry ez well ez you do Yurup; so I'll drag this yer team over to Robinson's on the river, give the horses a bite, and then meander down this yer ridge, and wait for ye. Ye'll see me from the Kernel's." And without waiting for a reply, he swung his horses' heads toward the river, and rolled away.

The same querulous protest that had come from the windows arose from the group, but vainly. Then followed accusations and recrimination. "It's YOUR fault; you might have written, and had him meet us at the settlement." "You wanted to take him by surprise!" "I didn't. You know if I'd written that we were coming, he'd have taken good care to run away from us." "Yes, to some more inaccessible place." "There can be none worse than this," etc., etc. But it was so clearly evident that nothing was to be done but to go forward, that even in the midst of their wrangling they straggled on in Indian file toward the distant cabin, sinking ankle-deep in the yielding sand, punctuating their verbal altercation with sighs, and only abating it at a scream from the elder lady.

"Where's Maria?"

"Gone on ahead!" grunted the younger gentleman, in a bass voice, so incongruously large for him that it seemed to have been a ventriloquistic contribution by somebody else.

It was too true. Maria, after adding her pungency to the general conversation, had darted on ahead. But alas! that swift Camilla, after scouring the plain some two hundred feet with her demitrain, came to grief on an unbending tussock and sat down, panting but

savage. As they plodded wearily toward her, she bit her red lips, smacked them on her cruel little white teeth like a festive and sprightly ghoul, and lisped:--

"You DO look so like guys! For all the world like those English shopkeepers we met on the Righi, doing the three-guinea excursion in their Sunday clothes!"

Certainly the spectacle of these exotically plumed bipeds, whose fine feathers were already bedrabbled by sand and growing limp in the sea breeze, was somewhat dissonant with the rudeness of sea and sky and shore. A few gulls screamed at them; a loon, startled from the lagoon, arose shrieking and protesting, with painfully extended legs, in obvious burlesque of the younger gentleman. The elder lady felt the justice of her gentle daughter's criticism, and retaliated with simple directness:--

"Your skirt is ruined, your hair is coming down, your hat is half off your head, and your shoes--in Heaven's name, Maria! what HAVE you done with your shoes?"

Maria had exhibited a slim stockinged foot from under her skirt. It was scarcely three fingers broad, with an arch as patrician as her nose. "Somewhere between here and the carriage," she answered; "Dick can run back and find it, while he is looking for your brooch, mamma. Dick's so obliging."

The robust voice of Dick thundered, but the wasted figure of Dick feebly ploughed its way back, and returned with the missing buskin.

"I may as well carry them in my hand like the market girls at Saumur, for we have got to wade soon," said Miss Maria, sinking her own terrors in the delightful contemplation of the horror in her parent's face, as she pointed to a shining film of water slowly deepening in a narrow swale in the sands between them and the cabin.

"It's the tide," said the elder gentleman. "If we intend to go on we must hasten; permit me, my dear madam," and before she could reply he had lifted the astounded matron in his arms, and made gallantly for the ford. The gentle Maria cast an ominous eye on her brother, who, with manifest reluctance, performed for her the same office. But that acute young lady kept her eyes upon the preceding figure of the elder gentleman, and seeing him suddenly and mysteriously disappear to his armpits, unhesitatingly threw herself from her brother's protecting arms,--an action which instantly precipitated him into the water,--and paddled hastily to the opposite bank, where she eventually assisted in pulling the elderly gentleman out of the hollow into which he had fallen, and in rescuing her mother, who floated helplessly on the surface, upheld by her skirts, like a gigantic and variegated water-lily. Dick followed with a single gaiter. In another minute they were safe on the opposite bank.

The elder lady gave way to tears; Maria laughed hysterically; Dick mingled a bass oath with the now audible surf; the elder gentleman, whose florid face the salt water had bleached, and whose dignity seemed to have been washed away, accounted for both by saying he thought it was a quicksand.

"It might have been," said a quiet voice behind them; "you should have followed the sand dunes half a mile further to the estuary."

They turned instantly at the voice. It was that of the Man on the Beach. They all rose to their feet and uttered together, save one, the single exclamation, "James!" The elder gentleman said "Mr. North," and, with a slight resumption of his former dignity, buttoned his coat over his damp shirt front.

There was a silence, in which the Man on the Beach looked gravely down upon them. If they had intended to impress him by any suggestion of a gay, brilliant, and sensuous world beyond in their own persons, they had failed, and they knew it. Keenly alive as they had always been to external prepossession, they felt that they looked forlorn and ludicrous, and that the situation lay in his hands. The elderly lady again burst into tears of genuine distress, Maria colored over her cheek-bones, and Dick stared at the ground in sullen disquiet.

"You had better get up," said the Man on the Beach, after a moment's thought, "and come up to the cabin. I cannot offer you a change of garments, but you can dry them by the fire."

They all rose together, and again said in chorus, "James!" but this time with an evident effort to recall some speech or action previously resolved upon and committed to memory. The elder lady got so far as to clasp her hands and add, "You have not forgotten us--James, oh, James!"; the younger gentleman to attempt a brusque "Why, Jim, old boy," that ended in querulous incoherence; the young lady to cast a half-searching, half-coquettish look at him; and the old gentleman to begin, "Our desire, Mr. North"--but the effort was futile. Mr. James North, standing before them with folded arms, looked from the one to the other.

"I have not thought much of you for a twelvemonth," he said, quietly, "but I have not forgotten you. Come!"

He led the way a few steps in advance, they following silently. In this brief interview they felt he had resumed the old dominance and independence, against which they had rebelled; more than that, in this half failure of their first concerted action they had changed their querulous bickerings to a sullen distrust of each other, and walked moodily apart as they followed James North into his house. A fire blazed brightly on the hearth; a few extra seats were quickly extemporized from boxes and chests, and the elder lady, with the skirt of her dress folded over her knees,--looking not unlike an exceedingly overdressed jointed doll,--dried her flounces and her tears together. Miss Maria took in the scant appointments of the house in one single glance, and then fixed her eyes upon James North, who, the least concerned of the party, stood before them, grave and patiently expectant.

"Well," began the elder lady in a high key, "after all this worry and trouble you have given us, James, haven't you anything to say? Do you know--have you the least idea what

you are doing? what egregious folly you are committing? what everybody is saying? Eh? Heavens and earth!--do you know who I am?"

"You are my father's brother's widow, Aunt Mary," returned James, quietly. "If I am committing any folly it only concerns myself; if I cared for what people said I should not be here; if I loved society enough to appreciate its good report I should stay with it."

"But they say you have run away from society to pine alone for a worthless creature--a woman who has used you, as she has used and thrown away others--a--"

"A woman," chimed in Dick, who had thrown himself on James's bed while his patent leathers were drying, "a woman that all the fellers know never intended"--here, however, he met James North's eye, and muttering something about "whole thing being too idiotic to talk about," relapsed into silence.

"You know," continued Mrs. North, "that while we and all our set shut our eyes to your very obvious relations with that woman, and while I myself often spoke of it to others as a simple flirtation, and averted a scandal for your sake, and when the climax was reached, and she herself gave you an opportunity to sever your relations, and nobody need have been wiser--and she'd have had all the blame--and it's only what she's accustomed to--you--you! you, James North!--you must nonsensically go, and, by this extravagant piece of idiocy and sentimental tomfoolery, let everybody see how serious the whole affair was, and how deep it hurt you! and here in this awful place, alone--where you're half drowned to get to it and are willing to be wholly drowned to get away! Oh, don't talk to me! I won't hear it--it's just too idiotic for anything!"

The subject of this outburst neither spoke nor moved a single muscle.

"Your aunt, Mr. North, speaks excitedly," said the elder gentleman; "yet I think she does not overestimate the unfortunate position in which your odd fancy places you. I know nothing of the reasons that have impelled you to this step; I only know that the popular opinion is that the cause is utterly inadequate. You are still young, with a future before you. I need not say how your present conduct may imperil that. If you expected to achieve any good-- even to your own satisfaction--but this conduct--"

"Yes--if there was anything to be gained by it!" broke in Mrs. North.

"If you ever thought she'd come back!--but that kind of woman don't. They must have change. Why"--began Dick suddenly, and as suddenly lying down again.

"Is this all you have come to say?" asked James North, after a moment's patient silence, looking from one to the other.

"All?" screamed Mrs. North; "is it not enough?"

"Not to change my mind nor my residence at present," replied North, coolly.

"Do you mean to continue this folly all your life?"

"And have a coroner's inquest, and advertisements and all the facts in the papers?"

"And have HER read the melancholy details, and know that you were faithful and she was not?"

This last shot was from the gentle Maria, who bit her lips as it glanced from the immovable man.

"I believe there is nothing more to say," continued North, quietly. "I am willing to believe your intentions are as worthy as your zeal. Let us say no more," he added, with grave weariness; "the tide is rising, and your coachman is signaling you from the bank."

There was no mistaking the unshaken positiveness of the man, which was all the more noticeable from its gentle but utter indifference to the wishes of the party. He turned his back upon them as they gathered hurriedly around the elder gentleman, while the words, "He cannot be in his right mind," "It's your duty to do it," "It's sheer insanity," "Look at his eye!" all fell unconsciously upon his ear.

"One word more, Mr. North," said the elder gentleman, a little portentously, to conceal an evident embarrassment. "It may be that your conduct might suggest to minds more practical than your own the existence of some aberration of the intellect--some temporary mania--that might force your best friends into a quasi-legal attitude of--"

"Declaring me insane," interrupted James North, with the slight impatience of a man more anxious to end a prolix interview than to combat an argument. "I think differently. As my aunt's lawyer, you know that within the last year I have deeded most of my property to her and her family. I cannot believe that so shrewd an adviser as Mr. Edmund Carter would ever permit proceedings that would invalidate that conveyance."

Maria burst into a laugh of such wicked gratification that James North, for the first time, raised his eyes with something of interest to her face. She colored under them, but returned his glance with another like a bayonet flash. The party slowly moved toward the door, James North following.

"Then this is your final answer?" asked Mrs. North, stopping imperiously on the threshold.

"I beg your pardon?" queried North, half abstractedly.

"Your final answer?"

"Oh, certainly."

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